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Some of Life's Basic Tools

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Adopted from remarks to Upper School students, faculty, and guests at the 1991 Fifth Day Honors graduation exercises at Friends Academy (NY). In composing his address, Mr. Peters collaborated with his son, who was a member of the graduating class.

I would like to ask you all if you would not mind excusing the seniors and me for a minute. I would like to address my remarks directly to them. We'll return shortly.

So, it's over, the prom is tonight, and on Saturday you're out of here! Before you physically depart from Friends, I would like to suggest that you consider *three tools* for your toolbox of life. Let's take them one at a time; the first tool that will help you succeed. . .

Question from the floor? All of you seniors may not have heard. The question is—"Once I leave Friends, will I be hassled about the way I get my hair cut?"

It's funny that you should ask that question, because it is a great lead-in to the first tool. Actually, you will find many ways in life to make a statement about yourself to your peers and elders.

My initial experience in the Marine Corps began with. . . a haircut. During my first hour at bootcamp, and in about 15 minutes, my whole platoon of 50 men and I had our heads shaved clean. What I did in that short 15 minutes was to begin the process of making us all equal in one another's eyes. Ceremoniously, symbolically, and physically

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From the Editor

Reflections on Los Angeles

The events precipitated by a fateful jury decision near Los Angeles in late April still weigh heavily on all of us. The verdict and its consequences will undoubtedly affect every aspect, every corner of this nation for years to come—schools being no exception.

- Not far from my home, 3,000 miles from L.A., 100 students walked out, protesting; some started a fight; two were arrested.
- In a city that experienced serious racial unrest in the sixties, thankfully only one building was attacked—but it was a library, where numerous books were burned, including, ironically, a biography of Martin Luther King, Jr.
- A pair of CRIS Conferences held at the time the decision was made public had a more somber tone than anyone would have anticipated from pre-announced themes like "A Spring Celebration" and "The Courage to be Ourselves."

What are we to learn from all of this, and what are some of the necessary consequences for independent education next year and beyond?

Some Lessons

One lesson is clear: we are a *divided and wounded* nation, still unliberated from racism. Despite the shock of the decision, upon reflection many people recognized that it demonstrates how racism still survives in 1992 and how easily racist attitudes can manifest themselves and tear apart the fabric of a community. It is, I suspect, no coincidence that this verdict came in a year of Japanese-bashing and increasing Klan visibility. The verdict is, in retrospect, *shocking* but not truly *surprising*.

Another lesson is also clear: we are an *angry and fragile* nation, still unredeemed from injustice

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we become a family with this initial common experience. It was necessary and extremely effective, and it was amazing how one haircut took away our cosmetic individuality. Immediately, distinction by socio-economic class, ethnic group, geographic region, or religious affiliation seemed to vanish. If you have ever seen the movies "Officer and a Gentleman" or "Full Metal Jacket," you received a graphic picture of this process of depersonalization in a swift clip.

I can still remember having to go to bed right after that traumatic haircut. Keep in mind, this was 1969; the Beatles had set the stage for the acceptability of long hair and the unacceptability of the once-admired crew cut. It was only 8:30 p.m. I desperately wanted a shower. I did not know a soul in this room where 50 men lay, and in anticipation of a 4:30 A.M. wake-up, I asked myself over and over—what was I doing here?

Ten weeks later and with only 32 men remaining, amazingly I found myself at the graduation wondering how I would leave this family that I learned to rely on and worked so intensely with—the same bittersweet feelings that you may be feeling now as you prepare to leave this senior family.

It is this feeling of belonging and *family*, the first tool, that is so very critical to our future existence. Family—cherish it, if you are already fortunate enough to be a part of one, maintain what you have, and continue to build and develop your future families.

There is no better song that bridges all generations than Harry Chapin's "The Cat's in the Cradle." Build your family, take good care of it—it will, in turn, take care of you. Whether it is your immediate family or your school family, nurture that family now! Don't wait—let the song serve as a reminder and warning. "When you coming home, son? I don't know when, but we'll get together then, Dad, you know we'll have a good time then."

Family is right now.

Sense of Humor

Yes, a question from the back—"Will the school that I am attending in the fall show reruns of 'The Academy of Love'?" ["The Academy of Love" was a weekly soap opera

performed by the senior class on Tuesday mornings.]

Your laughter introduces me to the second tool that we will add to your tool box—it is a *sense of humor*. Taking oneself too seriously can lead to sure trouble.

When I was 20, and I had the notion that I wanted to fly airplanes, with my entire savings in hand, I signed up to learn how to fly at the local airport. The instructor was just starting out and had one two-seater airplane that flew from this airport with a short grass runway. I would have to first fly with him 10 hours, and he would let me take off and land the plane five times on my own. Once that phase of my instruction was completed, we would then fly away to another airport, practicing navigation, radio, and meteorology along the way.

Well, I finally soloed, and that clear, bitterly cold winter day arrived when we would make our first cross-country flight to Martha's Vineyard. Ron, my instructor, told me to go outside and warm up the

plane. I cranked it up, got the engine humming, and dashed back to the warm flight shack. To my immediate surprise, Ron looked at me in terror and asked, "Is that the plane engine I hear?" and before I could reply, "Yes," we heard a crunching sound!

Ron ran to the window and screamed in anguish, "No, no, no!" The plane that I left unattended taxied itself quite naturally into the nose of a beautifully sleek, twin-engine Aztec owned by Fred. Ron told me to go home! I did, without question.

I eventually received my license from Ron and the FAA, we laughed about our mistake, and Fred's Aztec is as good as new.

Do not be afraid to laugh at yourself, and enjoy life with a laugh now and then. Always keep a sense of humor in the *top* tray of your tool box.

Service to Others

Yes, in the front. . . Let me repeat the question. "We have spend so much time with community service at Friends; will I have to continue to get involved in service to others?"

The opportunities to serve others will surely continue to present themselves throughout your

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life, but it is highly unlikely that you will become involved to the degree that was presented to you here, at Friends. Know that the program for community service at Friends is unquestionably one of the finest in independent schools.

The quickest way to climb out of depression is to perform a mitzvah, to direct your energies outward and give to another human being.

Let me say this about providing service for others—it is probably the best opportunity in life for you to recharge your batteries and to build self-confidence. This is the third tool for your tool box—*service to others*.

Some time ago, I had the wonderful opportunity to have dinner with Dr. Sol Gordon. He is a noted psychologist, lecturer, and author who has written many books on self-esteem and young people. During this dinner he talked of *mitzvah*. *Mitzvah*, a Hebrew word, is a truly kind, virtuous, considerate, and ethical deed. I still clearly remember him addressing those seated at the table saying that it is a proven fact that the quickest way to climb out of depression is to perform a *mitzvah*, to direct your energies outward and give to another human being.

At a recent church service I attended, the priest spoke of love and quoted St. Thomas Aquinas' definition of love as "the effective willingness to do good for another human being." Think about that—the effective willingness to do good for another human being. Never be afraid to give of yourself to another individual. Do it often and give freely. Know that any solid relationship is grounded on self-sacrifice and sharing of oneself with another.

As an aside, I will add that one of the easiest ways to serve another individual is to be a good listener. Probably one of the most difficult tasks and yet, a most effective way of helping someone is to listen with interest and empathy. We humans are not good listeners and must constantly be vigilant to improving our listening skills.

The three tools I have recommended, *family*, *sense of humor*, and *service to others*, will fix just about anything that we break along the way in life—depending on how you use these *Craftsman* tools (and I call them *Craftsman* because they have a reputation for being the very best). At the same

time, I look upon your education at Friends as the best. Like *Craftsman* tools, which are guaranteed for life, the tools you receive from Friends will be carried through life, although there are no guarantees. How you use these tools is up to you.

I often think about recording artists like Tracy Chapman, Bruce Springsteen, Bonnie Raitt, and others who have persevered for years before they got their big break in life. I am amazed at how their persistence continued in spite of repeated failures and lack of recognition early in their careers. These tools will enable you to persist with patience, courage, and determination in spite of the amount of time that elapses before your next success. I firmly believe that these tools are key ingredients to a successful, healthy, happy life.

One last thought. . . . While it is not mandatory that you continue with a formal education from here, remember—education is what promotes opportunity in life. The more opportunity you have, the more occasion you will have to use your tools, and the more you will feel good about yourself—thus giving you the strength to build your family and to give to others.

Thank you, and may God bless. ◇

Summer Institute Filled to Capacity

CRIS happily announces that the 1992 Summer Ethics Institute has been enthusiastically received—and regretfully adds that many applicants had to be turned away because of space limitations.

The Institute will be held at the College of Preachers, on the grounds of the National Cathedral in Washington, July 5–10.

The Institute will follow a seminar format that had originally been planned for a dozen participants under the guidance of CRIS staff members Dan Heischman and Mike Gorman. The number of registrations caused the formation of a second group of 12, each to be led by one of the staff.

A waiting list of another 10 people was recorded before the May 1 registration deadline, and others were added even after that date. These numbers, combined with comments from teachers and chaplains, suggest that the Institute has "touched a nerve" and will fill a gap in independent education. ◇

